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Don't delay high-speed train decision

Editorial

State legislators must take a few more important steps to put a proposed \$9.95 billion bond measure for high-speed rail on the November ballot, which will finally determine whether voters have the will to back the costly, gargantuan venture.

The proposal raises serious questions but the biggest question of all is whether it can win the voters' blessing, given the state's other problems.

That's why the state Senate should approve critical legislation for the bond measure. Such a measure was originally supposed to go before voters in 2002. It's time to move the project forward - or shelve it, if that is the voters' conclusion.

AB 3034, which cleared the Assembly already, helps clear the way for the fall vote. Among other things, it would remove any possible legal obstacles to private and federal funding for the 800-mile system linking Northern and Southern California. This is critical because funding questions have dogged the proposal for years.

The state bond would only finance a part of the cost. Proponents hope federal and private-sector money will cover the balance of the \$40 billion price tag but there are no guarantees. There also is the question of whether the service itself can raise enough money to repay investors, cover existing expenses and turn a profit.

On the other hand, high-speed rail could solve a number of pressing problems. It uses a third of the energy of air travel and a fifth of the energy of automobile travel, said Quentin Kopp, who chairs the California High-Speed Rail Authority. That's a key selling point amid worries over our dependence on foreign oil, the growing cost of gasoline and fears about global warming.

The electric-powered, 200-mile-an-hour trains, which could whisk Bay Area travelers to Southern California in a little over two-and-a-half hours, will also take pressure off our constrained infrastructure. It would be more feasible for California to build the rail line than to expand the capacity of its airports and highway system for a growing population, Kopp told the Daily News editorial board recently.

Kopp said the voters' support in November was indispensable. If they nix the project, it could doom the high speed rail push for the foreseeable future.

Do we need high-speed rail now? It's an important question and there's no reason to delay the answer any longer. We urge the Senate to approve AB 3034 and the governor to sign it so that the voters can finally decide whether they can support such an ambitious endeavor.